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Statement of
Bob Heffernan
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Connecticut Green Industries Council
before the
Education Committee
Connecticut General Assembly
on funding for the state's 19 regional Agriscience High Schools

February 22, 2011

Despite thousands of agricultural jobs in the state taken by imported labor, Connecticut's 19 regional agriscience high schools lack proper funding and routinely turn away hundreds of qualified students.

"In the rush to embrace choice in public education today, the agriscience high schools have been left behind," says a new report of a citizen council that advises the Commissioner of Education.

The state budget allocates just $5 million for the agriscience centers, but more than $143 million for the system of technical high schools, although both serve the same purpose of preparing high school students for specialized careers.

A local school system has to pay nearly $8,000 tuition to send one of its students to the regional agriscience center, but pays almost nothing to send the same student to a technical school, the latter funded 100% by the state. There's a big disconnect here.

"Today, there's a huge disincentive for towns to enroll their students in regional agriscience high schools: the high cost," the report says.

The 19 school districts that house the agriscience schools also are penalized, receiving up to $5,000 less than what it actually costs to educate each student, the report points out. The disparity causes more than 1,100 eighth graders to go on waiting lists and one-third of all applicants to be turned away from the program each year. The schools enroll 3,200 students altogether annually.

The agriscience schools fall short of training enough workers for Connecticut's $3.5 billion agricultural economy. "The schools produce about 750 graduates each year—hardly enough to fill this

MORE

need, forcing our farms to import labor," the report concludes. Close to 50,000 workers are employed at farms and related businesses in the state.

The report also takes issue with deficient staffing of the 19 agriscience centers—totaling about 125 teachers and administrators statewide. "Connecticut is seriously stretching this system to the max," the report said. "State reviews of the schools often find ag teachers dangerously overloaded with multiple duties and functions, and after-hours commitments to school programs, such as the FFA programs."

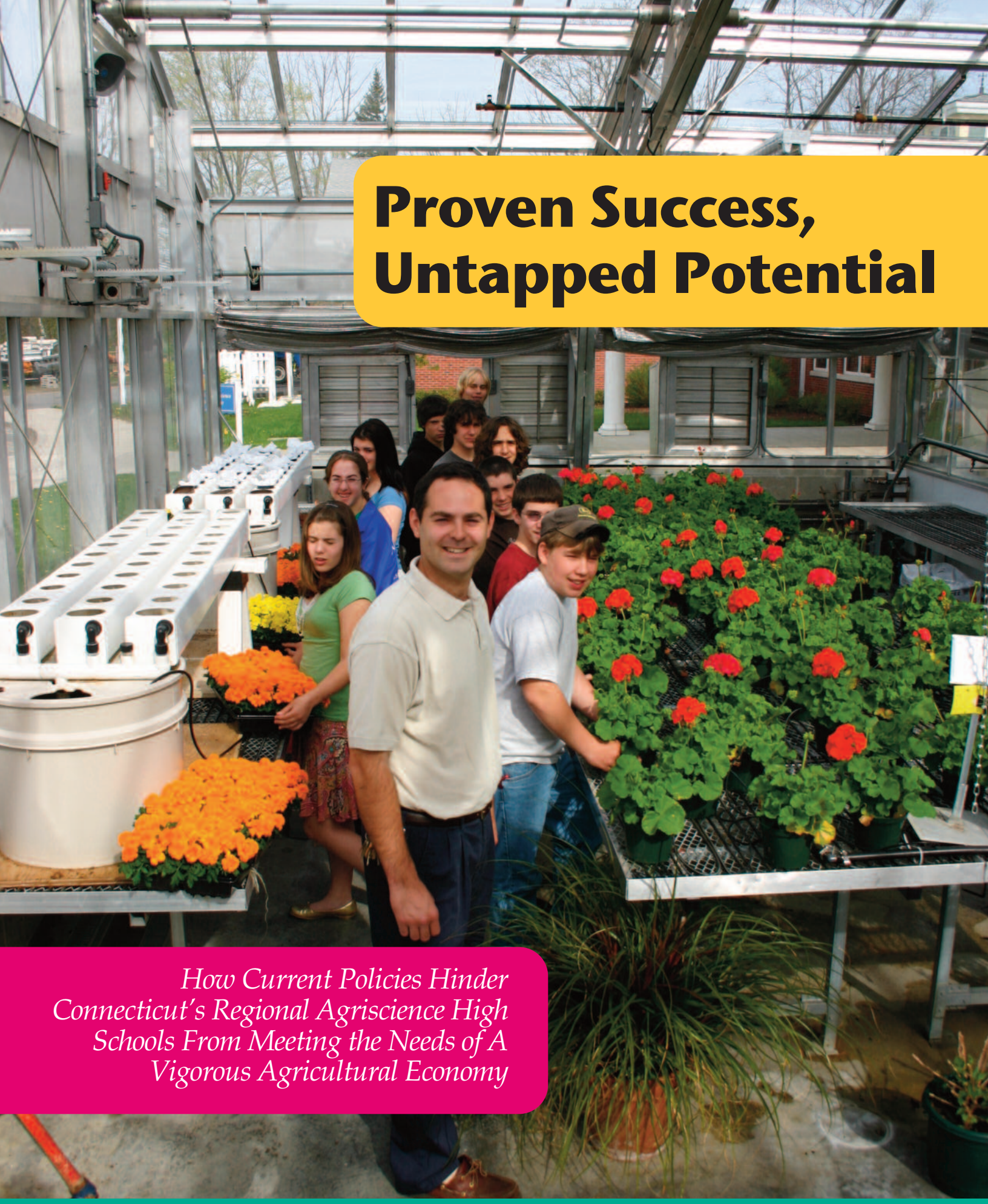
Long before there were technical or magnet or charter high schools, Connecticut's agricultural science centers were started in 1920 at the high school level to lure youths to careers in agriculture.

The schools' model produces successful graduates, according to the report. 100% of the state's ag centers have achievement test scores meeting or exceeding the proficient levels in math, science, reading, and writing. Drop-out rates are far lower than the rest of high school students. 53% of ag students get college degrees, and 90% are employed full-time following high school or college.

"The agriscience schools portray public education at its best," the citizens group believes. "These schools have perfected the model of parent, community, and industry involvement at all levels. They're an excellent example of why personalized learning works so well."

We endorse the report's recommendation that the Governor and state legislature close the gap by increasing the per pupil state grant for agriscience students to hosting towns, providing a per pupil grant to sending towns, and restoring to 95% the state reimbursement grants given to host school districts for construction, renovations, and equipment.

Issued by the Connecticut Agriculture Science and Technology Education State Consulting Committee, the report is titled *Proven Success, Untapped Potential: How Current Policies Hinder Connecticut's Regional Agriscience High Schools From Meeting the Needs of A Vigorous Agricultural Economy.* Copy attached, or send an e-mail to ConnGreen@aol.com



# Proven Success, Untapped Potential

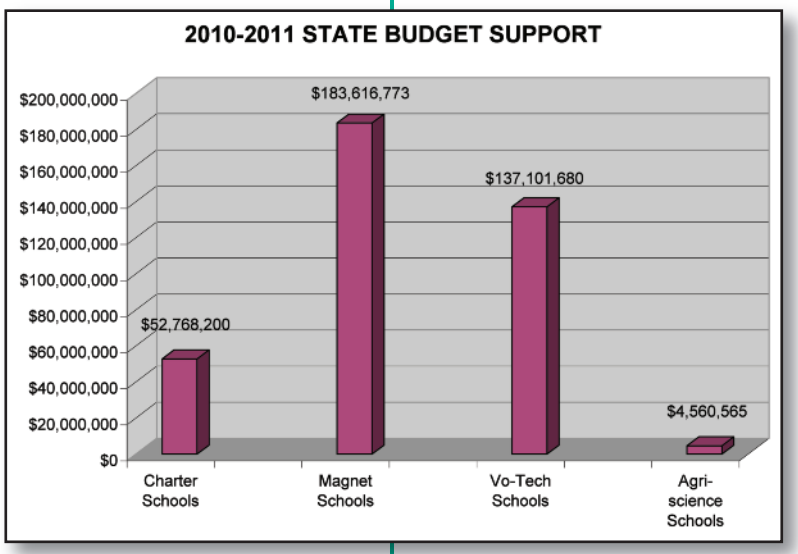
*How Current Policies Hinder Connecticut's Regional Agriscience High Schools From Meeting the Needs of A Vigorous Agricultural Economy*

**REPORT OF THE CONNECTICUT AGRICULTURE SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION STATE CONSULTING COMMITTEE • FEBRUARY 2012**

# SUCCESS

## Why Connecticut Needs the Agriscience High Schools

Contrary to the public's misperception, agriculture is actually expanding in our state! There is some form of agriculture in all 169 towns. Connecticut's agricultural sector generates over $3.5 billion in annual economic impact from 405,616 acres of land in farms, and more than 50,000 employees. Over 13% of all of Connecticut's total land is in some type of farm use. Today's Connecticut agriculture has changed dramatically in the past half century. 50% is in diverse food crops (dairy, seafood, specialty food etc.), the other 50% is in plants you look at (trees, annuals, perennials etc.). Much of it is exported outside our borders, bringing in cash to our state economy. Connecticut's agriculture is precious because these products are made from scratch to finish within our own borders. We are perfectly situated on the map so our farm products can reach 20% of the nation's population within a day's truck delivery. Today's farms in Connecticut have to compete in a new high-tech economy against other states which invest more dollars in marketing, branding, workforce training, and innovation.




## The Agriscience Schools Don't Produce Enough Trained Labor

Too many farms and agricultural businesses in Connecticut can't find a sufficient number of in-state workers, preventing them from expanding. The state's green industry alone has such a gap that it estimates as many as 8,000 of its workers may be undocumented—and there are another 5,000 jobs that go unfilled each year. Agriculture could be so much more in Connecticut, but can't expand without trained labor. The state's 19 agriscience high schools produce about 750 graduates each year—hardly enough to fill this need, forcing our farms to import labor.


## Connecticut's Original Magnet/Choice Schools

Long before there were vo-tech or magnet or charter schools, Connecticut's vocational agriculture centers were started in 1920 at the high school level to lure youths to lifetime, well-trained careers in agriculture. Recently the term "vocational agriculture" was changed to ***agricultural science and technology*** to better reflect what today's schools are all about—agriculture in Connecticut demands excellence in science, technology and math to compete in the tough marketplace. These are STEM schools in every aspect. There are 17 agriscience centers strategically placed geographically around the state attached to high schools ("host schools"). Another two centers have their own facilities specializing in aquaculture in Bridgeport and New Haven. In the rush to embrace *choice* in public education today, the agriscience high schools have been left behind.

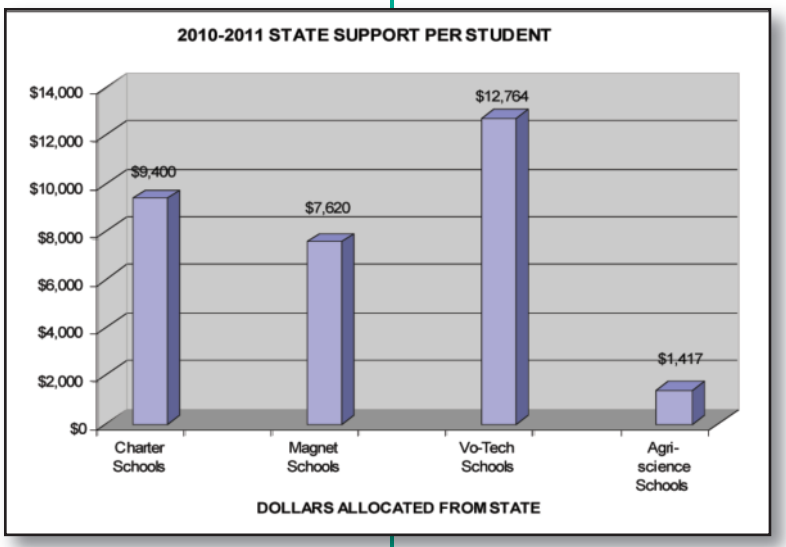
## They're Models of Success

The agriscience schools portray public education at its best. These schools have perfected the model of parent, community, and industry involvement at all levels. They're an excellent example of why *personalized learning* works so well. Teachers get latest industry updates directly from all sectors of Connecticut agriculture. Farm producers and technicians regularly speak to classes and host students at their farms. Local *consulting committees* advise the ag centers to stay on paths pertinent to modern agricultural practices. Students often get to learn under the same set of teachers all four years of their high school education. Students acquire leadership and public speaking skills through their FFA associations. To graduate, students must successfully complete work-based *supervised agricultural experiences* (SAEs) directly related to their chosen field within agriculture. Several ag centers boast of having valedictorians, salutorians, and National Honor Society students. 100% of the state's ag centers have achievement test scores meeting or exceeding the *proficient* levels in math, science, reading, and writing. Drop-out rates are far lower than the rest of high school students; agriculture is the hook that keeps kids in the school. 53% of our ag students get college degrees, and 90% are employed full-time following high school or college. Connecticut must reward and enhance the ag schools.

# POTENTIAL

## Far Too Many Students Can't Participate

Theoretically, every Connecticut high schooler can choose to go to one of the regional agriscience centers. Only 3,200 are enrolled. But in fact, more than one third of all who apply statewide are turned away. None of the state's 19 ag centers are actually filled to capacity. Some school districts don't encourage their students to consider attending the regional ag center; some actively *discourage* it. At the root of all this: financial disincentives of the sending schools that dislike paying to send their students away to the ag center, and of the host schools that do not receive enough funding to pay for teachers, equipment, and facilities. In Killingly, the ag center has only 120 students in a wonderful facility designed to teach 175; there's no money to hire the additional agriculture teachers needed. At Lyman Hall High School in Wallingford, the new ag center could hold another 140 students beyond the existing student population, but three more teachers would first need to be hired. Sufficient state support to turn around this situation is sorely needed.




## Facilities Are Catching Up, But Not All

Thanks to some wise state investment, most of the agriscience centers have been modernized or renovated in the past 10 years. But Connecticut is turning back the clock by reducing the state contribution for these *facilities* from 95 per cent down to 80 per cent this year. The state's funds to help these schools maintain and acquire up-to-date *equipment* also have been cut back. Some agriscience centers, such as Bloomfield, will soon need major renovations but their taxpayers will shoulder a disproportionately larger burden unless the state formula is reversed. The state has a responsibility to finance modernization of these schools because they are accepting students from large regions—often as many as 22 different towns. That burden must not fall on the hosting school district. The paradox is that so many ag centers have beautiful facilities utilized under-capacity. The state must align modern facilities with the ability to staff them appropriately so the optimum number of students can be educated.

## Ag Teachers Overloaded & Needing Training

With *total* staffing of all the 19 agriscience centers—administrative and teaching—combined at about 125 statewide, Connecticut is seriously stretching this system to the max. State reviews of the schools often find ag teachers dangerously overloaded with multiple duties and functions, and after-hours commitments to school programs, such as the FFA programs. Some of the schools have only two or three teachers. In some schools, the Department Chair also is the school secretary and a teacher. Few ag schools have their own guidance counselors, so ag teachers pick up the slack. Teaching agricultural sciences calls for a high level of sophistication and targeted training, with not enough time for teachers to be trained in emerging new ag technologies. To stay relevant with current agriculture, these teachers need regular retraining. Connecticut also needs a more formal program to train new teachers in agricultural education, enhancing the current effort at UConn's College of Agriculture.

## Labor Rules Interfere With Ag Internships

Historically, a critical component of the agricultural education process has been real-time experience in the farm or business setting for students. Yet, federal and state laws and regulations on child labor have sometimes dissuaded farmowners and businessowners from hosting *supervised agricultural experiences* (SAEs) because of the risk in penalties from misinterpretation. There must be a sensible balance between safety of the student and incentives of businessowners to welcome these internships.

## Encouraging Towns to Send Students to Ag Centers

Today, there's a huge disincentive for towns to enroll their students in regional agriscience high schools: *the high cost*. They must pay $7,992 and provide transportation for that student to the ag school with no hope of reimbursement from the state. Over the past years, some towns have challenged this unfunded mandate by attempting to reduce the number of students they send, thus denying students their school choice option. Prior to the 1990s, the state used to reimburse sending districts 50% of the cost, which was later reduced to 25% and then eliminated in the early 1990s. If we're really serious about enhancing the role of our ag schools as an integral part of rebuilding the Connecticut economy, a solution must be found that makes it more conducive for all school districts to let their kids go to ag schools.

| High School Program | State Funding 2011-2012 | State Funding 2012-2013 | Increase |
|---|---|---|---|
| Magnets | $215,855,338 | $235,364,251 | $19,508,913 |
| Technical | $140,520,635 | $143,702,045 | $3,181,410 |
| Charters | $57,067,400 | $59,839,400 | $2,772,000 |
| Open Choice | $19,839,066 | $22,090,956 | $2,251,890 |
| **Agriscience** | **$5,060,565** | **$5,060,565** | **ZERO** |

## Funding Disparity Between Ag, Magnet, Charter & Technical Schools

The state budget spends over $143 million on technical high schools annually, but only $5 million on agriscience high schools. Connecticut towns like the state's technical high schools because they don't have to pay *anything* for their students to attend—that system is fully state-funded. If you were a Superintendent of Schools in your town, would you rather spend zero to send your resident student to the regional technical school, or spend $7,992 to send that same student to a regional ag center?

## ...And the Hosting Schools Don't Get Enough

The 19 towns that host the agriscience schools receive $7,992 from the sending towns for each student, plus a small state grant of $1,417. But when you add that up, it falls far short of what it actually costs the host town to educate that student—by nearly $5,000 short. This not only places an undue burden on the 19 towns hosting our ag schools, it also works against accommodating the more than 1,100 students on waiting lists for them this school year.

## RECOMMENDATIONS: Giving Connecticut A World Class Regional Agriscience and Technology System at the High School Level

- The Governor, state legislature, towns and citizens must acknowledge the success of the program and adopt a strategy of sufficient support at all levels.
- Increase the per pupil state grant for agriscience students to hosting towns to cover the cost between tuition received from sending towns and actual cost to educate the student. Full parity would amount to over $4,800 per student.
- Reduce the wide gap between what the state pays for technical and for agriscience schools by providing a per pupil grant to sending towns. The target should be eventually 50% of the tuition paid by sending towns, phased in over the next few years.
- Restore to 95% the state reimbursement grants given to host school districts for construction, renovations, and equipment, where it was two years ago.
- The state should assist in adequate teacher training and recruitment of new ag-science teachers, and in providing for the necessary teacher hiring so the optimum number of students can attend the schools.
- Make state and federal labor rules friendly to ag student internships.

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